

DISCUSSION AND TALK

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN GOING INTO PRISONS

For Community Workshops

Most of us who have been going into prisons for a long time are likely to forget how momentous the experience may seem to a newcomer. So it seems a good idea to pass on some of our accumulated knowledge.

1. Expect that the prison administration, the prison staff, and the inmates will all have their own perceptions and expectations of us as volunteers.

- a) The expectations of the prison administration revolve primarily around security. They are responsible for the security of the prison itself and everyone within it--prison personnel, volunteers, and inmates, more or less in that order. These expectations are spelled out in the Department of Correctional Services' Sample Guidelines--Rules and Regulations for Volunteers, reproduced herein. The current (1992) statewide rules, procedures and benefits directly affecting volunteers are spelled out in the excerpt from DOCS Directive 4750: Volunteer Services Program, also reproduced herein. These should be read before first going into prison, and consulted whenever any difficulty arises in the relationship between a volunteer and a prison administration.

- b) The personal expectations that inmates have of volunteers probably are at least as many as there are inmates. They range from very positive to very negative and even destructive. Some specific expectations are described in the report of the Gathering of Women Friends Going Into Prisons (Albany, NY, April 1983), reproduced in the AVP Basic Workshop Manual. Men as well as women should read this; much of it applies to all of us.

If there is any one expectation that volunteers should have of inmates in general, it is that they tend to be very perceptive. The nature of their prison experience itself teaches them to be so. Anyone who has ever done the exercise Masks as a masked participant may have experienced the sharpened perceptions that result from the squelching of free expression.

- c) The expectations that inmates have of AVP as a program are less diffuse. AVP has been in the New York prison system for over a decade, and most inmates have at least an idea of what it is. Most of them also see it as a potential point in their favor when they meet the Parole Board. AVP itself does not wish to be, or to be seen as, part of the parole process. We specifically warn that participation in the program will do nothing to heighten chances of parole unless the Board sees evidence of a change for the better in an individual's behavior, and perhaps not even then. Happily, participating inmates who have come to the program to impress the Parole Board usually decide, in the course of the workshop, that it is worthwhile in its own right and go on to involve themselves in it for its own sake.

- d) The expectations that prison staff (correctional officers, chaplains and program people) have of volunteers is that the volunteers shall obey the rules and cooperate with them sufficiently to make it possible for them to do their jobs. Beyond that, the attitudes of individual COs and other staff members toward AVP volunteers range from downright surly to enthusiastically cooperative. Most of them at least try to be helpful, within the confines of their authority. We need to remember that these people, particularly the COs who are in effect imprisoned all day, every day, have a difficult job to do. They must do their best to apply the rules conscientiously. The job requires them to live with danger, often with boredom, and often with hatred (and contempt from the people they must deal with daily. COs have jobs that are paramilitary, and they are expected both to enforce the rules and to obey their superiors; there is little leeway for their discretion. We give them respect, and we try not to add to their burdens unnecessarily. Examples of important rules: Do not bring in contraband. (By definition, "contraband" is anything brought in without being cleared in advance.) Do not give gifts to individual prisoners or deliver notes or other messages for them. (There are good security reasons for this that you might not suspect. In one New York City Jail, for instance, a volunteer gave a bandanna to an inmate during a visit. The

bandanna was used to make a handle for a shiv fashioned from a bedspring sharpened on a concrete floor. Legally, that volunteer might have been held as an accessory for a stabbing.) Respect confidentiality with the prison personnel as well as with the inmates. Do not interfere with prison discipline (you can always take things up with prison officials later if necessary).

Some prison employees do obstruct and make our task difficult. But they seldom succeed in making it impossible, because there is always someone on the prison staff who does care about the inmates and will help. Two examples:

One AVP lead trainer came to a workshop to find that only half the participants had showed up. The CO claimed that they had all been called, but were not interested in coming. The inmates who were present told her (the lead trainer) that this was not true. She applied to the Watch Commander, who backed the CO. Finally she found the Catholic chaplain, and he made it possible for all the participants to get there. So keep on trying, and remember that prison staff are not immune to Transforming Power. We often fail to live up to our best potential by forgetting that.

Another AVP trainer (working on this occasion in a prison outside New York State) was approached by one of the chaplains and asked to report to him any information that might be gleaned from the workshop participants about crimes committed that might be unknown to the authorities. No such information had been revealed by anyone in the workshop (it almost never is), but even if it had been, to reveal it would have been a flagrant breach of the confidentiality we promise the participants and expect from them. So this trainer told the chaplain that she would report to the prison authorities any breach of security that occurred during the workshop, but that the rule of confidentiality would not permit her to reveal any other information of any kind. Then she quietly reported the incident and her response to the other chaplain, who was an enthusiastic AVP supporter. Nothing more was said by anyone on the matter. So do not allow yourself to be intimidated or persuaded to violate the ground rules of AVP.

2. Know that AVP also has expectations of its volunteers, and of the prison systems within which we work. Our purposes and emphases are different from those of a prison system, and we are bound to have problems with some of their requirements.
 - a) Most notably repugnant to the spirit of AVP is the requirement that in the course of our volunteer work we conduct ourselves "in a professional and impersonal manner." A basic ingredient of a nonviolent lifestyle is the building of community. This cannot be done by remaining professional and impersonal. We do build friendships. They are valuable. However, let us recognize that the prison system has in mind some very real problems. Some prisoners do exploit volunteers. Some prisoners are very dangerous and might also harm a volunteer. The DOCS has a responsibility to protect us from both, and it takes that responsibility seriously.

It is incumbent on us to take steps to protect ourselves, each other and the AVP program. Some no-no's:

Do not carry in unnecessary valuables (among other things, these could be a temptation to someone who is trying to change his life, and we do not wish to add to his or her problems).

Do not give out personal addresses or phone numbers-your own or anyone else's. Remember that nothing is truly private in a prison, and even if the person you give it to is reliable, it could always be stolen.

Do not take blank AVP certificates into a prison and leave them around unmatched. Believe it or not, blank certificates can be used as currency on the prison bartering system, with consequences that can only be detrimental to AVP. Bear in mind that many other things-cigarettes for example, that do not serve as currency in the street take on that function in a prison. Try not to contribute to this black market economy. (The prison's rules are set up partly to avoid this-one reason they should be obeyed even when they seem unreasonable.)

- b) Jailhouse romances are well covered in the report of the Gathering of Women Friends Going Into Prisons, mentioned above. We do not rule out the possibility of an important love, but Volunteers must bear in mind that people who are in prison are not living a normal lifestyle, and if we are meeting them for the first time as prisoners, we cannot come to know them as they will be when released. Experience—that of AVP, other volunteer organizations and individuals, and the Department of Correctional Services - overwhelmingly indicates that most jailhouse romances do not long survive in the community, and many have very negative consequences. It is this experience primarily that has prompted the DOCS rule that a person may not be at the same time a registered volunteer and on an inmate's visiting list. That rule offers the volunteer who forms a personal relationship with an Inmate a choice of status—volunteer or visitor. It rests with AVP to remember that people going into prisons, especially those involved in prison-love relationships, need support and counsel from people they can trust. It is up to us all to provide it, and to help people to be clear about the choices they make.

Perhaps the most important of our guidelines is, trust your own gut feelings. If you feel you are being exploited, you probably are. If we respect ourselves and others, we will not go far wrong. We are doing an important, valuable task. With respect, caring, and community, we will do it well.

Suggested handout... Guidelines for Volunteers and Directive 4750: Volunteer Services Program